

DEVELOPING STRESS HARDINESS BY INDUCED STRESS INOCULATION

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The term "stress" relates to pressures of life that place strain on people. Medicine sees the results of this strain as social, psychological, and physiological damage. In essence, this is an outgrowth of deviating to a significant degree from an ideal, dynamic state of equilibrium known as homeostasis (Greek for "staying the same"). Significant, prolonged deviations can weaken our ability to resist pathology. Almost everyone is aware that stress is an inevitable part of the living process. Unfortunately, Western culture has considered it a disruptive force which can only be reacted to after it occurs. This resembles Western medical belief that disease can only be treated after the fact. The concept that enhanced human knowledge can limit vulnerability to disease is gaining greater acceptance. There has been no comparable view of human learning to cope effectively with the inevitable stresses of life. Stress management subsequent to the manifestation of extensive pathology was the norm. In recent years the concept of developing hardiness relative to stress has appeared.

While stress cannot be avoided, skills can be learned to cope as effectively as possible with disruptive forces. The modern mental health field has established techniques for this purpose. Two parallel approaches have been created: systematic desensitization for present life stress and stress inoculation to prepare for anticipated stress which is certain to occur. These terms deliberately resemble medical concepts of vaccination or inoculation to develop resistance prior to exposure to a pathogen. The goal of programs teaching stress hardiness is not the impossible avoidance of stress, but rather to respond to it in the most positive manner and minimize its negative effects. People come to view this as skills acquisition which empowers them with optimal self-control in the areas of cognition (thinking), feeling, and behaving. Homeostatic disruption and psychophysiological complications become negligible.

Until a few years ago, only this self-help empowerment seemed important. Today, a self-help system that can be executed by patients at the time and location of choice has the crucial added benefit of saving time and decreasing the involvement of mental health professionals. Patients can improve significantly with less expense in managed mental health care insurance

benefits, which are currently being severely reduced. The stress hardiness programs considered here use natural phenomena of behavior: making one's thinking as realistically positive as possible, learning to really relax (the body loves relaxation and returns easily to homeostasis), and employing guided visual imagery suggestions to mentally practice coping in actual life situations.

Modern cognitive theory and psychotherapy state that our conscious thoughts about stressors—such as negative events, situations, or persons—determine the intensity of our emotional and behavioral reaction. People very seldom have the wrong emotional reaction, but they may overreact. Instead of viewing something as a problem, they may see it as a disaster, a catastrophe. Learning not to react with “catastrophizing” or “awfulizing” is a prerequisite to becoming more resistant to stress. The closer one is to the basic state of homeostasis, the looser and more relaxed one becomes. This imparts positive mental and physical attributes conducive to learning and practicing stress coping behavior. Since the beginning of human existence, relaxation—simply listening to sounds of ocean surf, wind blowing through foliage, babbling brooks, or waterfalls (and later, more formalized meditative relaxation)—has been a natural pathway back toward homeostasis and personal harmony. Our ability to cope with present and future stress is facilitated. The brain functions more effectively in controlling the body's performance. In the last decade, it has been discovered that the ultimate relaxed state (alpha or theta brain-wave levels) enhances control of the brain/body. When this true relaxed state is achieved, the less dominant brain hemisphere (which in 90 percent of the world's population is the right hemisphere) is activated and equals the functioning of the left, computer-like, portion of the brain. This kind of functioning is promoted by The Monroe Institute's Hemi-Sync tapes which synchronize both hemispheres. The most important advantage of this synchronization from the viewpoint of stress hardiness relates to the right hemisphere's increased ability to produce and accept imaginative imagery as genuine and meaningful.

We do most of our thinking in mental images or pictures produced by the mind's eye of the right hemisphere. Symbolically, the brain is like a VCR and will believe and react to whatever tape is inserted and played. The advantage is that humans can learn what mental pictures (guided visual imagery) are preferable and result in positive rather than negative reactions. This is comparable to choosing a sad or a happy movie depending on the emotions we wish to evoke.

Many humans, especially Americans, view stressors as insurmountable disasters and catastrophes. Thus, it falsely seems appropriate to visualize ourselves as helpless victims of overwhelming life processes. Stress inoculation for genuinely likely future stress, or systematic desensitization for current stress, reverses this scenario. We mentally see ourselves as strong enough to cope to a significant degree. A mental imagery scenario can be created to depict the most successful defense or coping mechanism. Repeatedly running this mental “tape”

(facilitated by a binaural beat audiotape) convinces the brain that the person is coping rather than succumbing. When the actual stressor must be faced, the brain reacts confidently with, "I've been handling this problem successfully for some time. This is no different. I'll cope!" This preparatory training resembles military maneuvers, combat course exercises, or civilian fire drills.

Achieving the invaluable relaxed alpha or theta brain-wave state is fundamental to the process. In the past, the various training techniques required extensive time and concentration and included cultural-religious connotations which were blocks to acceptance and implementation. Therefore, the ability to quickly and easily achieve the required relaxed state has been resolved by Monroe Institute research and audio products. The receptive ready-state for stress inoculation can be attained via an electronically facilitated sound process. I have been using this sequence of procedures for stress and chronic pain management for the past five years. It has proven so effective that it will be used exclusively for my remaining time in clinical practice.

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